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Indian Messiah: The attraction of Meher Baba to British audiences in the 1930s*

Abstract

This article considers the British reception to Meher Baba, an Indian religious figure, who first travelled to Britain in 1931. Following a tradition of Indian religious figures who toured Britain and America in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Baba was removed from organised religion and placed emphasis on self-realisation, and attracted large British followings notably dominated by women. This article argues that the 1930s witnessed a continuing interest in Indian religious figures and adherence to Orientalist stereotypes about Indian religiosity despite changing political dynamics. Exploring a range of public and private responses to Baba, following comparison with his contemporary Jiddu Krishnamurti, and discussing the role of British mediators Paul Brunton and Francis Younghusband, this article explores British impressions of Indian religious figures in the 1930s and how they were informed by notions of race, religiosity and gender.

1930s Britain and Indian religions

Global interest in Indian religions has been longstanding, evident in the nineteenth century as a number of figures from the Indian subcontinent such as Keshub Chunder Sen, Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda visited Europe and the United States. While the British Empire was at its height, interest in the ‘mystical’ East and its various ‘religions’ grew and were epitomised by the growing strength of the Theosophical Society (TS) and the successful 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Awareness was also growing as readership of publications and translations of texts on these religious philosophies grew, coupled with

ongoing cultural and literary fascination with exoticised, essentialised Indian spirituality.¹ In Britain, specialist bookshops, such as the one run by John and Nigel Watkins at the end of Charing Cross Road in London, or the Atlantis Bookshop near the British Museum, housing books on philosophy, religion, astrology and the occult, provided ample resources for curious men and women, and a space to meet other interested folk and even perhaps a ‘Mahatma or a high lama’.² This curiosity continued to prosper into the early twentieth century, especially after the First World War when interest in ‘new age’ religions and spiritualism increased for urban elites energised by the confusion and ‘ennui’ of the interwar period.³ As more men from the Indian subcontinent were visiting western countries to proselytise, convert and attract followers to their religious, philosophical or political groups, British understandings of world religions, spirituality, faith and of India’s relationship with the metropolitan centre were likely to be challenged. As Steven Sutcliffe has argued, the influx of various ‘gurus’ to cities such as London, Paris and New York, including Jiddu Krishnamurti, Mohandas Gandhi and Meher Baba, who were celebrated as modern ‘mahatmas’ ‘illustrated counter-hegemonic forces unsettling European colonial establishments’.⁴

During the interwar period, the imperial power was continuously being challenged in both Britain and the Indian subcontinent and yet was also steadfast in the face of these attacks. Despite Indian political activism, Orientalist celebrations of Indian spirituality continued to flourish. Indian religious men of different faiths were building up followings of devotees and setting up international ashrams but remained represented by essentialised tropes relating to the spirituality of Indians. However, these colonised subjects were also

¹ See for example, Ashok Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions 1772-1823* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

² Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography 1915-1965* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 107-8; Paul Brunton, *A Search in Secret India* (London: Rider, 1934), 23; A. E. Waite, ‘A Modern Eastern Teacher,’ *Bookman*, March 1926, 321.

³ Steven Sutcliffe, ‘The Origins of “New Age” Religion Between the Two World Wars,’ in *Handbook of New Age*, ed. Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 65.

⁴ Sutcliffe, 63-4.

appropriating and utilising their exoticised subjection for their own means and gains. On the one hand they emphasised ‘self-spirituality’, which was becoming so potent by the twentieth century, embracing universalist ideas that challenged notions of national and racial difference, and challenging the authority of organised religions; on the other hand they traded on images and stereotypes of Indian religions knowingly in order to use western markets for financial and egotistical gain. Though Victorian interest in spiritualism was related to communion with spirits, the spirituality of these Indians, which I discuss, was a broader concept of interest in the sacred and philosophical truths. Examples of such men include Jiddu Krishnamurti, a Theosophist and former ward of Annie Besant who first settled in Britain in 1911; Swami Yogananda who was based in the United States, alongside a number of Vedanta monks, but visited Britain a couple of times in the 1930s; Shri Purohit Swami who collaborated with W. B. Yeats on a number of translations of Hindu texts in the 1930s; and Meher Baba who is the main focus of this article.⁵ Baba, though of Parsi descent, embraced a broad ‘spirituality’ that borrowed from a number of traditions, and started a vow of silence in 1925. He first visited Britain in 1931, on the same ship as Mohandas Gandhi, and continued to tour the western world until the 1950s, retaining his vow of silence until his death.

British participation and interest in Indian religions in the decades following the Great War may not in the first instance seem compatible with the search for rationality and the rise of a modern, secularised world. Especially when the images and associations of these Indians were not generally of text-based mainstream religious beliefs, but often linked with the occult, storytelling and ‘hidden realities’.⁶ However, certain sections of British society were attracted to these ‘Eastern’ doctrines because, as James Webb argues, they liked the ‘Oriental

⁵ For more on Purohit Swami see Sumita Mukherjee, ‘The Emergence of a British Hindu Identity between 1936 and 1937,’ in *Men, Masculinities and Religious Change in Britain Since 1900*, ed. Lucy Delap and Sue Morgan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 146-167.

⁶ Gauri Viswanathan, ‘Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy,’ *PMLA* 123 (2008): 469.

exoticism, perfumes, incense, spices, and a hint of the sort of mysticism which need not be explained too much'. Webb argues that the diversity of deities, rites and mysteries was seen as important in cultivating and fostering religious belief anew in a part of the world where Christianity was losing its strength and power.⁷ 'Homebound bourgeois readers simply curious about, or vaguely frightened by, the recent eruptions of the esoteric and the exotic in their midst', according to Tomoko Masuzawa, became religiously awestruck when they came into contact with 'fleeting glimpses of transplanted Hindu sadhus and fakirs' and demonstrated 'fear, dread, and bottomless fascination all at once'.⁸ While historians such as Kumari Jayawardena have focused on the travel of western women to South Asia in the pursuit of spiritualism and religion, the emphasis here is on Baba, an example of an Indian religious man who travelled to imperial Britain to engage with western women (and men) and the range of public and private responses to this encounter.⁹ Baba was willingly exoticised by his followers and the press; he was lauded because of his ethnicity and appearance, and was successful because he was removed from traditional organised structures of religion and espoused broad philosophical teachings focusing on self-realisation. Although he did not come from a 'Hindu' background, he was identified in the mould of other gurus who were associated with a broad definition of Hinduism and Indian mysticism. He was one of the precursors to Indian 'gurus' such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi or Sathya Sai Baba who would become so successful in the western world from the 1960s and onwards.

Meher Baba was born Merwan Sheheriarji Irani, in Poona (now Pune), in Maharashtra, in February 1894. As mentioned, he was of Parsi descent.¹⁰ Irani studied at Deccan College in Poona and was inspired by a variety of other religious philosophies

⁷ James Webb, *The Occult Underground* (La Salle: Open Court, 1974), 74.

⁸ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 275.

⁹ Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁰ For an introduction to Zoroastrianism see Jenny Rose, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

including Sufism, Hinduism and Buddhism. At the end of 1921, having lived with a number of religious ‘masters’, including the female ‘master’ Hazrat Babajan, he adopted the name ‘Meher Baba’, meaning ‘Compassionate Father’. He took up a spiritual life and began to build up a domestic following. In 1925, Baba started to undertake periods of silence when he would only communicate via an alphabet board, spelling out messages interpreted by his disciples, and then built an ashram and school in Ahmednagar, in western India. Having started to attract some international interest from his Indian base, Baba decided to embark on a series of ‘world tours’ to Britain, Europe and America in the 1930s. He attracted varied press attention for his (now permanent) vow of silence. A charismatic individual, with long hair, and a force of personality despite his silence, Baba espoused a broad spiritual message, without the constraints of an organised religion, and built up a following largely consisting of European women. Many of these devotees followed him back to India to work in his ashram.

This article focuses in particular on the reception to, and the followers of, Meher Baba in 1930s Britain, and the aims are twofold: To discuss how Orientalist ideas of Indian spirituality, even of a ‘Parsi’, still had traction despite changing political relations, politicisation and nationalism in the 1930s; and to interrogate the dynamics of the relationships between British disciples and their Indian ‘gurus’ with particular reference to gender and gendered notions of spirituality.

Dynamics between Indian religious teachers and British disciples

The public faces and practitioners of Indian religions who visited Britain during this period were invariably men. Though spirituality and religion may have been equated with women, especially in the domestic sphere both in Britain and India, the leadership and dissemination

of the public face of Indian religions remained the preserve of men.¹¹ Yet these Indian men, when in Britain, sought and cultivated the company and devotion primarily of women. British women in India wrested intellectual and social control over colonial subjects in various ways, through attempts at conversion and religious reform, through the management of colonial households, through social reform organisations and through the use of racial language and imagery of colonised peoples as ‘children’. In the authority that Indian religious figures had over British men and women, they could now assert dominance; but these relationships were tempered by the ways their discourses were overloaded with essentialised tropes relating to gender and religiosity.

As Jayawardena has pointed out, not only did ‘swamis, gurus, philosophers, poets, orientalist, scientists and nationalists from South Asia became known in intellectual circles in Europe and the United States’ from the late nineteenth century, they became personal friends of many women of western origin who moved to India or Sri Lanka.¹² These included Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), Mirra Richard (the Mother) and Madeleine Slade (Mira Behn) who were the disciples of three of ‘India’s most revered figures’: Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi. These were women who travelled to the Indian subcontinent to pursue their religious missions, but did much to publicise the work of their gurus internationally. Meher Baba similarly had a number of women, known collectively as ‘Kimco’, who travelled to his Ahmednagar ashram to live and work, while others remained in Britain, America or Europe to publicise his mission abroad.

¹¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Difference – Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal,’ in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Culture in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 373-405.

¹² Jayawardena, 112.

For some of these women, association with Indian religions was a form of rebellion, rejecting the religions of their childhoods and the men of their society.¹³ As Joy Dixon has argued, the character of women's spirituality emerging in the late nineteenth century was related to and in tension with developing feminist struggles.¹⁴ Greater knowledge and contact with the Indian subcontinent and other Eastern cultures, coupled with the rise of print-literacy and literature about these religions, opened up new possibilities. By demonstrating independence of thought and worship, many could sense a correlation with the fight for women's rights. The TS, for example, had clear links with the female suffrage movement in Britain. Women had, of course, always been involved in religions, but as groups such as the TS and some interpretations of Hinduism and Buddhism emphasised universal brotherhood (understood as including sisterhood) and the balance between cosmic forces which included the balance between the masculine and feminine, women felt more included in ways than perhaps in comparable church hierarchies.¹⁵

Gendered representations of East and West, namely a representation of 'Orientals' as feminine and effeminate compared to the manliness and masculinity of western imperialists, may have had some influence too. These religious leaders, including Baba, wore robes, seen as effeminate, despite the masculinised strength of their authority. Jane Iwamura has discussed the way 'Eastern' religious figures, after the 1950s, were perceived as representative of an otherworldly spiritualism because of their appearance and their 'peculiar gendered character'.¹⁶ Eastern religions, representing feminised images of sensuality, through examples of art, the worship of female deities, and the associations the climate had with

¹³ Jayawardena, 119; see also Elisabeth Lutyens interview by Brian Harrison, 3 June 1975, 8SUF/B/049, The Women's Library, London.

¹⁴ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Mary F. Bednarowski, 'Women in Occult America,' in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 177-195.

¹⁶ Jane N. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

femininity, may have had more appeal to female audiences too. Peter Van der Veer has discussed how, within Hindu discursive traditions, men acquired spiritual power by realising their feminine side and drawing power from female deities.¹⁷ As Lucy Delap has argued in relation to Edwardian feminism and spiritualism, it appears as though the feminine form of religious leaders (as it was understood by their followers) proved that they could transcend gender with their evolved outlooks and be regarded as ‘supermen’.¹⁸ Did these Indian men, in leading and guiding western audiences, enjoy domination over women as a way to assert their masculinity and independence over years of colonial subjection? These relationships certainly reveal the fluidity of power relationships and of perceptions of gender within the imperial context.

Sexuality had been at the centre of religious revivals in nineteenth-century Britain which had at times ‘de-eroticised’ sexuality by associating it with spiritual communion.¹⁹ This relationship between spirituality and sex continued to hold resonance for sections of society into the twentieth century, but the appeal for women was not just about sex; women were increasingly interested in identifying themselves as being equal to the religious experiences of men. Although there are no prominently known sexual relationships that Baba had with his female devotees, there were many rumours surrounding the sexual nature of relationships between Indian gurus and women, including Krishnamurti who is discussed in this article, highlighting the stereotype of the essential sensuality of Indians. Even when such men professed themselves to be celibate, there were not only rumours but evidence of sexual affairs.²⁰ These were men who held positions of power, seen as ‘charismatic’ individuals who

¹⁷ Peter Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 81.

¹⁸ Lucy Delap, ‘The Superwoman: Theories of Gender and Genius in Edwardian Britain,’ *Historical Journal* 47 (2004): 113.

¹⁹ H. G. Cocks, ‘Religion and Spirituality,’ in *The Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. H.G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 157-179.

²⁰ For more contemporary accounts see Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, ‘Guru Logics,’ *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2012): 289-336.

thrived on religious adoration. This was often exploited sexually.²¹ On the other hand, gurus such as Baba who were viewed as asexual, or pre-sexual, because of their celibacy, and thus seen as childlike, often nurtured a maternal instinct in their female followers. The resulting absence of a sexual threat, and their religious authority, allowed for closer ties between the races, breaking down colonial barriers without the fears of miscegenation that were often associated with inter-racial imperial relationships.

British men and women asserted control over their Indian religious teachers in multiple ways. They took on paternal and maternal roles that infantilised these men, but they also sponsored and mediated for these Indians. Western mediators, such as Annie Besant for Krishnamurti and Meredith Starr for Meher Baba, and also Paul Brunton and Francis Younghusband, whom I will discuss, acted as ‘ventriloquists’. Krishnamurti and Baba would not have come to international prominence without them.²² However, these ventriloquists relied upon ‘charismatic’ Indian men too, who were deemed spiritually authentic because of their ethnicity, and who could emphasise palatable discourses on faith through the recognisable forms of texts and lectures.

Jiddu Krishnamurti: A Precursor to Baba

Nineteenth-century interest in new religious or spiritual outlets, with an ‘Eastern’ dimension, was typified by the establishment of the TS, set up by the Russian Madame Blavatsky and the American Colonel Olcott in New York in 1875. The Society presented a synthesis of elements drawn from the Christian Church, the Freemasons, Buddhism and Hinduism, Victorian spiritualism and science. It was linked, for just a few years, to the reformist Hindu association the Arya Samaj (also founded in 1875) in India, while Blavatsky and Olcott had

²¹ For more on charisma see Charles Lindholm, *Charisma* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Ann Ruth Willner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

²² Gauri Viswanathan, ‘The Ordinary Business of Occultism,’ *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2000): 1-20.

both converted to Buddhism in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1880.²³ The TS hosted a number of Indian visitors to Britain before Krishnamurti, including Mohini Chatterjee in the early 1880s, a favourite of W. B. Yeats. Charles Leadbeater brought over the thirteen-year old Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa in November 1889, and in 1913 he brought over another young Indian, Rajagopal Desikacharya, from South India.²⁴ In April 1909, however, Leadbeater met the fourteen-year old Jiddu Krishnamurti in Adyar and introduced Besant to him in Madras. Leadbeater, who investigated past lives, argued that Krishnamurti was the avatar of Lord Maitreya, the World Teacher. Besant took over guardianship of Krishnamurti, and his brother Nitya, born in 1895 and 1898 respectively, and in 1911, when their father started to contest this custody, she took the young boys to London.²⁵

The TS had become a crucial source of information for Europeans about India and Sri Lanka through those who had visited the subcontinent such as Leadbeater and Besant, and through those they brought to Europe such as Chatterjee and Krishnamurti. At its peak in the late 1920s, the TS had a membership of 45,000, and the Order of the Star in the East (the branch of the TS that regarded Krishnamurti to be the Messiah) had a membership of 30,000.²⁶ Emily Lutyens, the wife of architect Edwin Lutyens and daughter of Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, who served as Viceroy of India from 1876 to 1880, had joined the TS in 1910 and soon became very close to Krishnamurti and took an increasingly prominent role in the organisation of the Society. As Emily Lutyens described it to her husband: ‘Theosophy throws a glamour over India’.²⁷ Although this knowledge of India and Sri Lanka allowed sympathisers to award more attention and recognition to South Asian spiritual traditions and

²³ J. T. F. Jordens, *Dayananda Sarasvati: His Life and Ideas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), 209.

²⁴ Gregory Tillett, *The Elder Brother: A Biography of Charles Webster Leadbeater* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 51, 63, 66.

²⁵ Annie Besant, ‘J. Krishnamurti,’ *Theosophist* XLIV (January 1923): 423-4.

²⁶ Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 128.

²⁷ Emily Lutyens to Edwin Lutyens, 11 July 1912, LuE/28/1/21, Royal Institute of British Architects Archive, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

philosophies, the TS's information about Indian religions, as Joy Dixon has argued, came from elite Brahmin sources and European Orientalists. Thus they often regurgitated certain elite notions of Hinduism and Buddhism. The Theosophists did not associate with or have much interest in the lower castes and classes of Indians, and their main contact was with high-caste, English-speaking 'Aryan' males.²⁸ The Society's proclamation of the 'universal brotherhood of man' was concurrent with nineteenth-century theories of racial hierarchy which privileged 'Indo-Aryans' and valorised Sanskrit literature.²⁹ As a result of this perception of a homogenous Indian spirituality, some Theosophists might have looked for a 'Mahatma' in every Indian they encountered, believing all Indians to be innately spiritual.³⁰ These generalised understandings of Indian spirituality continued to be evident in 1930s Britain in the reception given to Baba, who epitomised this Indo-Aryan background.

Besant and Leadbeater nurtured Krishnamurti into a 'Mahatma' role. Following the death of his brother in November 1925, Krishnamurti claimed to 'channel' Lord Maitreya in December 1925. In June 1926, at a series of meetings at the Queen's Hall in London, Besant officially announced that Krishnamurti was the new 'Messiah'. Dressed all in white, Besant addressed a Theosophist gathering, nine-tenths of whom were women, to explain that the body of Christ had entered Krishnamurti's body.³¹ However, a few years later following personal disillusionment, Krishnamurti dissolved the Order of the Star of the East in 1929. He moved to Ojai in California and continued a career as 'mystic', spiritual seer and advisor away from the organisational control of the TS. Though Krishnamurti denied that he was a religious authority, he continued to act as a spiritual guide. He persisted in publicising his

²⁸ Dixon, 131.

²⁹ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 186-91.

³⁰ Dixon, 30.

³¹ See 'The World Teacher,' *Manchester Guardian*, 14 June 1926, and 'The "New Messiah",' *The Spectator*, 26 June 1926.

philosophical thoughts through lectures and publications, and led a relatively simple, religious life in public, which he encouraged others to follow.

A tour of Scotland in March 1931, for example, illustrates the interest that Krishnamurti continued to receive after he freed himself from Besant's control. After he had broken away from the TS, Krishnamurti was keen to stress and reiterate that he did not see himself as 'World Teacher' or 'Messiah', and in fact urged audiences not to worship him, but to follow their own paths to spiritual truths. And yet, he continued to offer lectures and guidance to receptive audiences. About 140 people, mostly women, came to hear Krishnamurti speak in the small town of Callander.³² He then moved on to speak at the Freemasons' Hall in Edinburgh where the audience was so large, despite the 600 capacity, that about 200 people were turned away. Again, notably, the audience was mainly composed of women and young girls. Dressed in a dark suit with a black tie, and described by the *Scotsman* to have 'jet black' hair that fell over his forehead and 'bushy' 'dark eyebrows', Krishnamurti urged the audience to think critically about his words and not to accept them without thought. Aware, because western audiences believed that he talked about 'vague Eastern mysticism', that Christian audiences wanted to understand him from the point of Christianity, Krishnamurti's overriding message was to avoid institutions and to concentrate on the individual.³³ It was this distance from organised religion, his international networks and focus on individual faith that bore many similarities with his contemporary, Meher Baba.

Brunton and Younghusband: British Interlocutors

³² 'Unheralded Arrival at Callander,' *Daily Record and Mail*, 14 March 1931, cutting from Krishnamurti Foundation Trust Archive, Brockwood Park, Hampshire (KFTA).

³³ 'No Wish to Convert,' *Scotsman*, 19 March 1931, 10. See also KFTA, *The Evening Dispatch*, 19 March 1931; 'The Philosophy of Krishnamurti,' *Evening News*, 19 March 1931; *Glasgow Herald*, 19 March 1931.

Paul Brunton, born Raphael Hurst in London in 1898, the son of Jewish émigrés from Eastern Europe, had met Meher Baba in India in 1930, before Baba was known internationally. In his early twenties, in the immediate period after the First World War, Brunton became involved with the TS and then the Spiritualist Society of Great Britain. Michael Juste has recounted his membership of the TS alongside Brunton. Juste explained that many European Theosophists, including Brunton, had a ‘passion for India’, and desire to visit India and Tibet for meditation and to achieve Nirvana.³⁴ Juste describes the Bloomsbury cafés and lectures that he and his friends would visit to learn more about and immerse themselves in all things ‘mystical’. It was with this background interest in the Occult and world religions, and as his interest in different faiths and philosophical outlooks increased, that Brunton began to write on these matters as a free-lance journalist, particularly for the *Occult Review*.³⁵ In 1930, Brunton decided to visit India by himself in search of ‘hidden’ yogis. His account of this journey, *A Search in Secret India*, was published in 1934 with Brunton explaining that readers needed an objective Western journalist to seek out the yogis in India and distinguish the real from the fake.³⁶

In his book, Brunton describes an encounter with an Indian in a bookshop in London before his visit to India, which had further inspired him to take the journey.

The speaker’s face fascinates me. It is unusual; it would be distinguished-looking among a hundred Indians. Power kept in reserve – this is my reading of his character. Piercing eyes, a strong jaw and a lofty forehead make up the catalogue of his features.

³⁴ Michael Juste, *The White Brother: An Occult Autobiography* (London: Rider and Co., 1927), 17.

³⁵ Annie Cahn Fung, ‘Paul Brunton: A Bridge Between India and the West,’ PhD thesis (1992), Paris Sorbonne University. Translated into English in 2004. <<http://wisdomsgoldenrod.org/publications>>, ch.1.2.

³⁶ Brunton, 14.

His skin is darker than that of the average Hindu. He wears a magnificent turban, the front of which is adorned with a sparkling jewel.³⁷

Fascinated by the appearance of an ‘exotic’ Indian man in the English bookshop, Brunton sparked up a conversation and was intrigued by the Indian’s insight into metempsychosis and insistence that India had taught classical learning and philosophy to the West. Brunton arranged to meet the Indian again. They talked of ‘Yogis’, men with mysterious higher powers, difficult to come across and whom Brunton decided to search for. Brunton was not sceptical of the Indian’s explanation that because he came from the Brahmin caste, certain qualities of faith were instinctive to his caste.³⁸ Brunton had high expectations before embarking on his journey; perhaps disappointment was inevitable. When he met Baba in India, for example, he decided that Baba possessed ‘religious genius’ but realised also that he was fallible and human.³⁹

There are some discrepancies in Brunton’s account of his travels in India. He had heard about Baba before he travelled out, and met him first at Meherabad, the ashram near Ahmednagar, before seeking out other ‘sadhus’ and ‘rishis’. Brunton implies that he spent months in India, but it was closer to six weeks, and he fails to acknowledge that he was accompanied by Baba devotees at the start of his journey. At the end of his tour of India he returned to see Baba, whom he described as the ‘Parsee Messiah’, but was no longer impressed. Although Brunton notes Baba’s Parsi background, the lack of ‘Hindu’ or high-caste ‘authenticity’ did not appear to be dwelt on by British commentators. Kevin Shepherd argues that Brunton’s impression of Baba had changed because he realised that the guru

³⁷ Brunton, 24.

³⁸ Brunton, 28-31.

³⁹ Rom Landau, *God is My Adventure: A Book on Modern Mystics, Masters and Teachers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), 110.

would not admit him as a disciple.⁴⁰ Yet, as with most accounts, as we shall see in the next section, Brunton gives a vivid description of Baba's appearance on their first encounter.

He is clothed in a long, spotless white robe, which looks ludicrously like an old-fashioned English nightshirt! His amiable and kindly face is framed in chestnut-coloured hair, which falls in long curly waves to his neck. [...] His nose rises into arched prominence and then descends into aquiline depth. The eyes are dark, medium sized and clear, but I find them unimpressive.⁴¹

Brunton was impressed by some of the other men he met on his travels, including Sri Ramana Maharshi. After his return to Britain, he continued to be interested in 'Eastern religions' and wrote a number of books on related topics such as *A Hermit in the Himalayas* (1936) and *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga* (1941). He then moved to Switzerland and became a spiritual guru to many, writing about Vedanta, Theosophy and other philosophies in his posthumously published *Notebooks*.⁴²

At the same time as Baba's visits to Britain in the 1930s, there were British mediators publishing and translocating ideas of spirituality associated with India. Krishnamurti, Baba and Brunton were not operating in a vacuum by any means. Another 'mediator' of note was Sir Francis Younghusband, born in 1863 in India, the son of an Army Major. He wrote the foreword to Brunton's *A Search in Secret India*. In his own distinguished military career, Younghusband was perhaps best known for his explorations in Tibet from 1903 to 1904. Here he met Hindus and Buddhists and had plenty of time for solitude and inner reflection. On leaving Lhasa in 1904, he focused his career on addressing religion and spiritual unity for

⁴⁰ Kevin Shepherd, *Meher Baba, An Iranian Liberal* (Cambridge: Anthropographia Publications, 1988), 147.

⁴¹ Brunton, 47.

⁴² Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004), 72-4.

British audiences. After his retirement to England in 1910, Younghusband gave a number of addresses and wrote many books on the subjects of spiritualism and mysticism. They included *Within* (1912), *Mutual Influence* (1915), *The Living Universe* (1933), *Modern Mystics* (1935), *The Sum of Things* (1939) and *Vital Religion: A Brotherhood of Faith* (1940). He also organised a series of conferences, World Congresses of Faiths, modelled on the 1893 Congress held in Chicago.⁴³

Younghusband's feature article for *The Times* on 'Religion in Indian Life', published on 23 March 1937, informed readers that 'religion occupies the supreme place' in India and that Indians were naturally inclined towards religion. Though Baba had returned to India by that time, it is clear that perceptions about the innate spirituality of Indians abounded, explaining Baba's immediate appeal to so many British devotees. Younghusband countered those who proclaimed that religion was merely for the elites by explaining how Indian villagers were religious too, as they worked closely with Nature and experienced 'intense religious enjoyment'.⁴⁴ This dichotomy between the materialist ties of Britain, which Baba often discussed, and the 'simpler' attributes of Indian life, were clearly powerful stereotypes despite the dynamic Indian nationalist movement and ongoing campaigns of civil disobedience at this time.

Describing Indian women as 'superstitious', and also keen to acknowledge the large Muslim population in India, as well as the work of Christian missionaries, Younghusband concluded that 'India, as the meeting-place of all the great religions, will play an increasingly prominent part in the religious life of the world.' Prescient of the future success of religious pilgrimages to India, Younghusband predicted that 'adherents of the various religions will converge on India as lovers of art converge on France and lovers of music on Germany', and ended his article by stating that then 'not only may religion occupy the supreme place in

⁴³ See Marcus Braybrooke, *A Wider Vision: A History of the World Congress of Faiths, 1936-1996* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2004).

⁴⁴ Francis Younghusband, 'Religion in Indian Life,' *The Times*, 23 March 1937, 55.

Indian life, but India may occupy the supreme place in the world's religious life.⁴⁵

Younghusband, then, was adamant that India and Indians offered religious expertise because of the innate geographical and racial make-up of the subcontinent. He, like many of his contemporaries, was attracted to figures who could epitomise these mystical characteristics. Baba was one Indian traveller who was able to exploit this interest.

By the 1930s, India was starting to become a site for British men and women to visit that was not only for imperial purpose but as a tourist destination for spiritual pilgrimage. Although the 1930s witnessed an escalation of conflict between socialism and fascism, these political ideologies did not mean that religious ideologies had lost their potency in the modern world. Hugh McLeod and Callum Brown have discussed the growth of secularism in Britain from the 1960s, and certainly there was a growing trend before this towards removal from the Christian church. However, as Jeffrey Cox has argued, Christianity in Britain was still very important in the early twentieth century though men and women were turning to institutes and societies outside of the building of the Church itself.⁴⁶ Indian religions and religious men were filling some of this vacuum in Britain. It is this turn away from organised religion, but continued interest in religious philosophies, that underpins the interest in Meher Baba.

Meher Baba

Meher Baba first left India in September 1931, with three Indian disciples, on the SS *Rajputana*. Mohandas Gandhi was also on board, heading to London for the second Round Table Conference, which would involve negotiations about the potential for dominion status

⁴⁵ Younghusband.

⁴⁶ See Jeffrey Cox, 'From the Empire of Christ to the Third World: Religion and the Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century,' in *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Andrew Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 76-122.

for India.⁴⁷ Baba, however, was not involved, nor did he comment upon, these nationalist activities. In London Baba was met by an English disciple, music teacher Kitty Davy. Davy was to go to India to live as a disciple of Baba from 1933 to 1952. Davy recalled how she was immediately attracted towards Baba at their first meeting.

Many were inexplicably, irresistibly attracted to him, even though most had no knowledge of Eastern philosophy. Many just found that they spontaneously felt 'bliss' in Meher Baba's presence, and they described a radiant joy and a precious tranquillity they had never previously experienced.⁴⁸

Baba was then taken to a retreat in Combe Martin, Devonshire, owned by Meredith Starr, a writer for the *Occult Review*. They had met before in India and it was largely through the efforts of Starr that Baba became known in Britain. Baba stayed in England for a month, attracting new curious British followers and also visiting some of the major tourist attractions in the capital city. In October, he travelled to Turkey and then Italy from where he sailed to New York and then stayed in America for a month.⁴⁹

Various devotees have recounted their first impressions of Baba in England in 1931 and those early days spent with him in Europe. Despite his vow of silence, they were won over by his personality and 'charismatic' aura. The dancer Margaret Craske described him dressed in a 'thin white gown, a short furry coat and a pink turban' but how she was 'completely won over by the love which seemed to permeate his whole personality'.⁵⁰

Christmas Humphreys, a British Buddhist (and former Theosophist), similarly later illustrated

⁴⁷ Charles B. Purdom, *The God-Man: The Life, Journeys and Work of Meher Baba with an Interpretation of His Silence and Spiritual Teaching* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 94.

⁴⁸ John E. Welshons, *One Soul, One Love, One Heart: The Sacred Path to Healing All Relationships* (Novato: New World Library, 2009), 13.

⁴⁹ Purdom, 96-7.

⁵⁰ Jean Adriel, *Avatar: The Life Story of the Perfect Master Meher Baba. A Narrative of Spiritual Experience* (Santa Barbara: J. F. Rowiny Press, 1947), 131.

‘a man who literally radiated love’.⁵¹ Herbert Davy, the brother of Kitty, became enchanted too, once he had spent time with Baba in private meditative meetings.⁵² The actress Delia De Leon, another close female devotee of Baba, met him in that first week in London.

I was stunned with the wonder and beauty of him. I had seen his face before in my dreams; the eyes were startling in their beauty; the face seemed of luminous honey color, framed by a halo of long dark hair.⁵³

Baba’s early devotees such as Davy, Craske and De Leon became his lifelong followers and as a group these women were known as ‘Kimco’, following him to India to work in his ashrams there. This preponderance of female followers is evident by the very fact that they had their own collective name. As Craske observed, not only were many of Baba’s disciples women, but many were involved in the arts: Craske was a ballet teacher, De Leon ran a theatre, and others were actors, directors and dancers.⁵⁴ These women, from the upper sections of British society, had the freedom of time to spend in the company of Baba. Besides a lack of sexual threat mentioned above, they were attracted to Baba through a sense of passiveness that came through his silence, and also because of his novel ideas of religious philosophy and individual faith outside the structures of organised religion.

In his first visit to Devon in 1931, Baba met journalist Charles Purdom, who was to interview him for a newsreel and write a biography entitled *The God-Man*, published in 1937. Purdom was editor of the weekly literary journal, *Everyman*, and he dedicated a couple of editorials to Baba. The first, on 24 September 1931, explained why Baba was a ‘Perfect Master’ because he was ‘united’ with God and had ‘conscious knowledge of God’. This

⁵¹ Christmas Humphreys, ‘The Man of Love,’ *Buddhism in England* 16 (1941): 77.

⁵² Kitty Davy, ‘Meher Baba, 1931’, *The Awakener* 11 (1966): 8.

⁵³ Adriel, 135.

⁵⁴ Margaret Craske, *The Dance of Love: My Life with Meher Baba* (North Myrtle Beach: Sheriar Foundation, 1980), 29.

knowledge of God and ‘power of truth’ fulfilled a need of modern men and women, according to Purdom, for ‘experience’: ‘We know what science teaches, or can get that knowledge, and we know what the sages say. We do not need to know anymore. We want the evidence of knowledge put into practice.’ Purdom appreciated that Baba did not have a ‘religion’, as noted by his various religious influences, and had ‘no startling things to say’.⁵⁵ Rather it appeared that being in the presence and company of Baba was enough for Purdom to find spiritual guidance and peace. Indeed, Baba seemed to be a projection of his devotees’ faiths. They accepted that he had supreme knowledge and ‘truth’, but as he did not speak he did not need to share his wisdoms with them. Baba epitomised a broad, vague religious philosophy that could be interpreted by his followers as they saw fit, especially as his silence meant that there was even more room for interpretation rather than dogma. He did not ever appear to break his silence in close quarters but communicated his philosophy through the alphabet board and writing, and thus by simple assent at the interpretations his close disciples put forward. He advocated meditation in and outside of his presence and urged his followers to design their own answers and truths to their spiritual questions. Baba’s self-exoticisation through silence helped in asserting this authority, when his voice could not.

Purdom followed up this article with another on 21 April 1932 when Baba returned to England for a second time and was beginning to elicit more press attention. Purdom described him as a ‘delicately built’ and ‘simple’ man with ‘strong features’ and ‘power’ who wore ‘Eastern dress’ in the house but ‘ordinary European clothes’ in the street: ‘This power is not magnetism or personality, much less is it any sort of hypnotism. It is a feeling of confidence that he has achieved complete self-mastery’.⁵⁶ A young poet, Milo, described the ecstasy he felt when he met Baba in Combe Martin and realised that he had found ‘the

⁵⁵ C. B. Purdom, ‘A Perfect Master,’ *Everyman*, 24 September 1931, 272, 274.

⁵⁶ C. B. Purdom, ‘More About the Perfect Master,’ *Everyman*, 21 April 1932, 400, 402.

knowledge of the Love of God' and the 'culmination of his quest for the Living Truth'.⁵⁷

With his criticism of a western society too dependent on materialism, and with his discussion of 'Truth', 'Reality' and the 'true Spirit of Religion' without organised religion, and intentions to bring all religions and cults together 'like beads on one string', without imposing 'Eastern ideas', Baba projected a universal idea of spirituality that excluded no-one and could be interpreted by individuals to their own design.⁵⁸ It was this openness which appeared to give his followers confidence in Baba's own spiritual power.

Having returned to India in January 1932, Baba left his headquarters near Ahmednagar again in March 1932, with six Indian disciples, including two of his brothers. His intended arrival in England was announced in the *Daily Mail* on 21 March, describing him as 'Gandhi's spiritual guide' and a 'new Indian Messiah'.⁵⁹ Their interest in Baba was manifold, for his perceived connection to Gandhi (because they travelled to Britain in 1931 on the same boat though they did not have any strong connection beyond that meeting), for his vow of silence and for the story of his initiation – that he had lain in a state of 'walking coma' for nine months, neither sleeping nor eating apart from occasional drops of water. Baba's devotees often hinted that he might break his silence at any point. This added to the intrigue and anticipation surrounding encounters with Baba, and increased attention on his teachings and activities.

Soon after Baba arrived in England in April 1932 a number of journalists from British newspapers were queuing up to interview him. On 8 April, he was interviewed by the *Daily Mail*, the *Star* and by Charles Purdom on camera for Paramount Studios.⁶⁰ James Douglas, editor of the *Sunday Express* and friend of Purdom, visited Baba in Kensington on 9 April.

⁵⁷ Adriel, 11.

⁵⁸ Purdom, 'More About the Perfect Master'.

⁵⁹ '7 Years Silence,' *Daily Mail*, 21 March 1932, 12.

⁶⁰ Avatar Meher Baba Trust Archives Online, Chanji's Diary, 8 April 1932, http://ambppct.org/archives/collections/written_materials/diaries/links/v9/9v00_page121to180.pdf; Interview can be seen on youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rt4xVI2odKw&feature=player_embedded

Douglas came armed with questions written with the help of Denison Ross, director of the School of Oriental Studies in London, 'designed to trap' Baba. The front page article, published 10 April 1932, along with full-length portrait, began by discussing the various terms used to describe Baba: 'Indian Christ or Messiah', 'a saint and a mystic, a Mahatma or spiritual superman', someone who could perform miracles and whose mission was to 'save mankind'. Douglas also described his 'large and radiant' eyes.⁶¹ The focus on Baba's appearance emphasises the ways commentators were interested in his appearance and ethnicity, and eager to describe this novel figure to national audiences.

The *Daily Mirror* also used its front page to publicise Baba with a photo, and then an article inside the paper about the "Miracle Man". Describing his 'large, lustrous black eyes' and his 'simple white robe, emphasising his mane of dark hair and heavy eyebrows and moustache', the reporter was particularly interested in stories of miracles. 'Can you raise the dead?' asked the *Daily Mirror* to which Baba replied 'If necessary' and described other miracles he had performed in India, curing lepers and people with contagious diseases, although he went on to state that miracles were 'unimportant' to those who had 'passed into his high spiritual sphere' beyond 'the earthly manifestations that are associated with miracles'.⁶² The newspaper followed up with another article about Baba four days later, after he had made a prophecy claiming that a certain young girl with an incurable disease would be cured within the next four months. The child's father, a naval officer, echoed some of the insight that Purdom had given about Baba explaining that 'I do not think it is what he says that matters so much', but 'I think it is rather what he is'.⁶³

Other national British newspapers were keen to interview Baba, revealing a wide public interest in his visit. The *Daily Herald* reported on a children's party Baba gave in Kensington on 10 April. Again attracted to his 'liquid, rather lovely eyes', the journalist

⁶¹ James Douglas, 'A Talk with the Strange Messiah,' *Sunday Express*, 10 April 1932, 1.

⁶² "'Miracle Man' talks to 'Daily Mirror'," *Daily Mirror*, 9 April 1932, 3.

⁶³ 'Baba Makes a Prophecy,' *Daily Mirror*, 13 April 1932, 2, 4.

explained that Baba was revered as a ‘Messiah’ by many and described him as ‘God-like’, having cured a London woman of asthma.⁶⁴ Baba was attracting interest from ‘people not usually susceptible to the teachings of the East’ according to a correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*.⁶⁵ Although Baba did not wear particular clothing that stood out, apart from the oft-worn white robe, journalists were compelled to describe the man for their readers. His most distinguishing features were his eyes and long hair. The *Daily Mirror* described Baba as a ‘little gentle creature, about 5 feet, 6 inches in height with dark auburn hair flowing around his shoulders, a light brown face, sharp aquiline features, keen eyes and heavy eyebrows’.⁶⁶

Baba was also feted in the local press. Returning to Combe Martin, the local Devon newspaper, *The Western Times*, whose correspondent was there to greet him on his arrival, secured an interview. The correspondent focused most of his piece on describing Baba’s appearance and bedroom (an ordinary room), and expressed his disappointment that he did not find any ‘weird things’ or ‘weird people’, admitting his desire to see more of the exotic. The *Western Times* also recounted Baba’s message from the retreat, which emphasised the individual but also rejection of materialism. Baba emphasised the difference between ‘East and West’, stating that ‘the West must understand the importance of spiritual development, and must realize divinity in every phase of life, in art, science, nature, and the daily routine. Infinite consciousness must be experienced’.⁶⁷

Not all press reports of Baba were complimentary, and he received a particularly damning account in the weekly journal *John Bull* in May 1932. It may have been written by, or with the assistance of, Paul Brunton. The double-page spread explained that the journal was exposing Baba for a fraud and charlatan, and described a man who depended upon and

⁶⁴ ‘Baba’s Children’s Party,’ *Daily Herald*, 11 April 1932, 3.

⁶⁵ ‘The New Indian Teacher,’ *Manchester Guardian*, 18 April, 16.

⁶⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 21 April 1932, quoted in Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher* (1986), 1587.

<http://lordmeher.org/index.jsp>

⁶⁷ ‘The New Messiah in Devon,’ *The Western Times*, 22 April 1932, 11.

sought publicity despite his ascetic lifestyle. The reporter, who had visited Combe Martin, was critical of Meredith Starr's role as agent for Baba and the money the two gathered up from followers, but was more disapproving of the way in which devotees 'considered it a privilege to kiss his bare feet' and the way he had often been photographed with 'admiring women lying at his feet'. These were clear concerns about the authority Baba enjoyed over his British devotees. The article, whose journal masthead claimed that people had the 'Right to Justice and Truth', included a number of photos of Baba to illustrate their concern. The *John Bull* explained that Baba had only come to notoriety a few years before and only had a few thousand followers in India at the most, and described him as a 'menace' to mankind.⁶⁸ It was true that Baba did not have millions of followers in India, as some had claimed. Although he had set up an ashram in India and established himself in Ahmednagar, Baba's international journeys and interaction with western audiences actually increased his domestic appeal when he returned to India.

The writer Rom Landau met Baba soon after Douglas' interview was published in the *Sunday Express*. Landau had visited Krishnamurti at a TS camp in Holland in the 1920s and now visited Baba in his lodgings in Lancaster Gate, and although his appearance corresponded with the descriptions he had read, Landau

waited in vain for the 'rush of personal fascination and force'; I missed the 'strange thrill' when he grasped my hand, and though he 'caressed me, laying his hand on mine', I could not make myself 'melt away under his enchantment'.⁶⁹

This extract reveals the anticipation and expectation surrounding Baba, but also illustrates that not all individuals who came into Baba's presences were enchanted by him. According to

⁶⁸ 'Sensational "John Bull" Exposure,' *John Bull*, 7 May 1932, 8-9.

⁶⁹ Landau, 106.

Landau, Baba's 'spiritual mission' was to educate people in 'true religion', a universal collective that would bring all individuals together experiencing the highest consciousness. Although Landau had concerns about Baba's character and signs of self-delusion, he could find no fault in principle with the spiritual message that Baba talked and wrote about.⁷⁰ In particular, Baba's focus on the uniqueness of each individual's spiritual journey gave his followers a personal attention that many found encouraging, as had been described by Purdom in *Everyman*. However, Baba's philosophy was drawn from a range of traditions, the Hindu Vedantas in particular, and he appeared to demand that devotees become full 'initiates' and disciples which seemed at odds with his emphasis on individualism.

In March 1933, Theosophist James Cousins was on the *SS Victoria* from Naples to Bombay, and saw a man and 10 young women on pilgrimage from London to meet Baba in India. Cousins read some of Baba's sermons, which were treasured as holy and 'unique', but which Cousins regarded as not so 'holy', familiar as he was with the Vedanta. Cousins compared Krishnamurti and Baba, arguing that while Krishnamurti jettisoned teachers, Masters and doctrines as 'preliminaries to spiritual freedom', Baba appeared to encourage followers to swallow his teachings whole.⁷¹ Indeed, it seemed that 'faith' had become an important tool whereby only those with 'faith' could feel Baba's power. Any individuals who met Baba and did not become devoted were berated for not letting go of their cynicism, doubts and material ties.

Not only did Baba face critics of his lifestyle and ideology, but as an Indian he also faced prejudice. Kitty Davy found it extremely hard to arrange lodgings for Baba in New York because houses and hotels refused to accommodate Indians.⁷² Later, in May 1932, when Baba was in London for a few days, the most suitable place to stay was at the Fellowship Club, Lancaster Gate, where fellow Indian monk Purohit Swami stayed, which was a few

⁷⁰ Landau, 109-11.

⁷¹ James H. Cousins and Margaret E. Cousins, *We Two Together* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1950), 592.

⁷² Davy, 'Meher Baba, 1931,' 26.

doors down from the London Institute of Indian Mysticism. The Fellowship Club was known to welcome Indians and provide vegetarian food.⁷³ However, despite the rise of fascist concerns in Europe, or socialist and anti-colonial nationalist insurgencies, Baba was not associated with political movements in the public mind. Although his ethnicity was essential to his success, the mystic transcended national cultures and political rivalries.

During 1932 and 1933, Meher Baba spent much time on 'holiday' in Europe with 'Kimco' and other followers. For example, in 1932, they travelled through Italy in the areas surrounding Florence and Tuscany. Kitty Davy recalls how the group must have appeared.

Many times we went to an open-air cafe in a little bay; a beautiful spot which seemed to appeal particularly to Baba. Onlookers, watching this queer collection of Westerners and Easterners gaily talking and laughing, sipping coffee and ices, were so puzzled. Was it a theatrical company or an Indian Maharajah's party? Idleness, luxury, feasting and self-indulgence some would say.⁷⁴

Meher Baba did not always wear robes and often wore suits and European clothing, although he was still portrayed as 'feminine'; Dorothy and Tom Hopkinson recount his visit to Spain in 1933 where he wore European clothes and a 'Spanish beret which concealed his hair', but still attracted attention.⁷⁵ Meher Baba spent much of his time attending the theatre and cinemas during his time in Britain, Europe and America. Not only was he enchanted by dramatic performances, he also engaged in discussions with film producers about making a film on his life. To that end he went to Hollywood in May 1932 and visited the Paramount,

⁷³ Kitty Davy, 'Baba's First World Tour, 1932,' *The Awakener*, 12, no. 1 (1967), 27.

⁷⁴ Davy, 'Baba's First World Tour, 1932 - Conclusion,' *The Awakener*, 14, 1 (1971), 19-38 at 28.

⁷⁵ Tom Hopkinson and Dorothy Hopkinson, *Much Silence: Meher Baba: His Life and Work* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974), 60.

Metro-Goldwyn and Fox studios.⁷⁶ He met various actors and actresses, including notably several meetings with the actress Tallulah Bankhead. Meher Baba also met Cecil B. De Mille, the director of *The Ten Commandments* (1923).⁷⁷ Later, in June 1934, he spent three days in Paris discussing arrangements for a film to be made but eventually these talks fell through.⁷⁸

Meher Baba continued to undertake international travel throughout his life, setting up ashrams in India and America. The siblings Mary and Will Backett, who had met Baba in his first visit in 1932, ran a centre, distributing his teachings, in London. From 1936 to 1949, Baba dedicated his time with the *masts* in India, the God-mad or God intoxicated, i.e. people who appeared insane but whom Baba argued were on a higher spiritual plane. In 1949, Baba took up a phase of renunciation where he only wore a white robe and travelled with an ochre-coloured cloth sack.⁷⁹ Baba returned to Britain in 1952 and 1956 and, though he continued to attract international followers and devotion, with a thriving ashram in Ahmedabad, he did not attract mainstream British press attention as he had in the 1930s. He died in India in 1969, having been injured in a couple of car accidents in the 1950s. Baba remains a highly influential and important figure for his followers, including famous followers such as Pete Townshend of The Who. The Avatar Meher Baba Trust continues his work in India and beyond, and maintains his home and archives, with an impressive online presence that includes digitisation of diaries and correspondence, and the various biographies written by Baba's disciples.

Conclusion

⁷⁶ Purdom, *The God-Man*, 103.

⁷⁷ Kalchuri, 5436. See also Landau, 108.

⁷⁸ Purdom, *The God-Man*, 126.

⁷⁹ Naosherwan Anzar, *The Beloved: The Life and Work of Meher Baba* (North Myrtle Beach: Sheriar Press, 1974), 59.

James Webb has argued that there was a decline in interest in Krishnamurti and other gurus in the 1930s coinciding with the worldwide economic depression and an increase in international political concerns as Europe geared up for World War Two, and Srinivas Aravamudan has suggested that the period 1920-47 witnessed a partial disappearance of the discourses of 'Guru English' as nationalism overwhelmed other agendas, but we have seen in the continued appeal of Krishnamurti, Baba and others that this was not the case.⁸⁰ British audiences seemed to crave new outlets for philosophical debate and admired the 'simplicity' of these men, particularly for their contrasts to the developments of the modern, capitalist world. As Francis Watson explained for the *Listener*, the BBC's weekly magazine, in 1956, Krishnamurti may have been viewed as the antithesis of the image of an Indian 'holy man' by some observers because he played sports and undertook huge amounts of international travel, but he fulfilled the expectations of audiences who demanded guidance from someone from the 'East'.⁸¹ Baba was also interested in material goods and enjoyed the perks of international travel, but these attributes were forgotten because of all the other 'mystical' elements of his persona.

Rising Indian nationalism did not prevent Indians and Britons from collaborating in lucrative spiritual adventures, especially as one of the most prominent Indian nationalists, Mohandas Gandhi, who was tangentially associated with Baba, clearly melded his ascetic lifestyle, clothing and spiritual messages with his radical politics. Key British personalities such as Besant, Brunton and Younghusband who had visited the Indian subcontinent were also instrumental in furthering publicity for Indian religious figures. Although contact and discourse was dominated by the upper middle classes, it was not just academics, or liberal imperialist elites, who could make contact and learn about these Indians, as evident in the

⁸⁰ Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 17; James Webb, *The Occult Establishment* (La Salle: Open Court, 1976), 25.

⁸¹ Francis Watson, 'Holier Than Thou?', *The Listener*, 12 January 1956, 49-50.

varied audiences who were aware of and met Baba, including women and working-class disciples. The range of newspaper reports on Baba in 1932 demonstrate the British national interest in this man. Despite some criticisms there was a notable lack of public cynicism about Baba, and reporters were able to distinguish the social impact of Baba's encounters from the concurrent nationalist activities of his countrymen (and women).

One of the key elements that allowed Baba such success in the 1930s was his image: his perceived ascetism, his celibacy and of course his vow of silence. Men and women were attracted to a figure who provided not only an alternative introduction to new philosophies with special emphasis on the individual, but they were also attracted by the 'exotic' nature of his appearance and manner. It was important that Baba did not appear as a sexual or political threat through his feminised clothing and avowed silence, so women could mediate roles with a man who was racially different but was deemed acceptable within received societal norms. Meher Baba was a deified leader who offered spiritual and physical protection and could take up a 'guru' role, an acceptable position for Indian males in British society. It was in his synthesis of the divine and the human, by emphasising individual faith but also operating with a group of mediators such as Starr and the Kimco group, and in celebrating his Indian ethnicity through which he flourished and gained support among British men and women.

The Indian subcontinent was not just the preserve of Hinduism and the 'ancient Vedas' in the British imagination. British men and women, seeking universal philosophical truths and enlightenment and alternatives to western material culture, were open to the teachings of a variety of men who could offer attention and guidance whether from traditional religions such as Islam and Buddhism, or amalgamations of them or 'new' religions incorporating ideas of 'spirituality'. The idea of Indian religion in interwar Britain, therefore, became broader, free from the constraints of organised religion, as exemplified in the success of Meher Baba and his teachings. In the case of Meher Baba, it was not so much what he said

or wrote, but how he presented himself. Travel to Britain had helped Baba attract larger audiences than he could have by remaining in India at that time. In particular, his physical presence in Britain, and at least the knowledge of his proximity to British audiences, even if they did not physically meet him but only read about him in the daily press, was important. It was entrancing to meet a mystical guru from the Indian subcontinent in the imperial motherland, someone who challenged gendered conceptions of religious devotion but also presented a distinctly exoticised image of Indian religious leadership, highlighting the potential market for international devotion before more notable gurus in the second half of the twentieth century.